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ABSTRACT

The University of South Alabama addressed a rapid increase in the population of limited-English-proficient (LEP) students in its freshman composition classes by developing classes in writing in English as a Second Language (ESL). These students were having difficulty in mainstream freshman composition classes, both with the proficiency level expected of them and with a feeling of isolation. In addition, teachers often had difficulty with classroom communication and cultural differences in rhetoric and organization of compositions. Teacher workshops in ESL pedagogy were begun, offering information about the ESL student population and services at the institution, second language learning and teaching, culture shock, aspects of ESL writing, evaluation of ESL writing, and advising. Readings and student compositions were used as instructional materials. Subsequently, teachers participating in the workshops volunteered to teach ESL composition course. Enrollment in these classes is limited to 20, and ESL students have the option of enrolling in either this or the mainstream course. Since the program's inception, the ESL student passing rate has risen substantially, and teachers have found that ESL student participation in class is much better. Students have responded enthusiastically, citing greater comfort in classroom communication. (MSE)

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Starting ESL Classes in Freshman Writing Programs

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Starting ESL Classes in Freshman Writing Programs

More than 450,000 international students and thousands of recent immigrants are enrolled in American colleges and universities, and this number is growing at the rate of about 5 percent annually. As a result, English Departments have to cope with the growing number of ESL students in their Freshman Writing programs. In fact, currently, the presence of a few ESL students in almost every Freshman Writing class appears to be the norm.

In Freshman Writing programs, ESL students are usually placed in three types of classes: in those dominated by native speakers (mainstreaming), in classes for basic/developmental writers, or in classes designed especially for ESL students. Leki (1992) has shown how ESL writers differ from native speaker and basic/developmental writers, and Silva (1993) has discussed the advantages and disadvantages of these placement options.

In this paper, I wish to describe how the English Department of the University of South Alabama handled the large influx of ESL students into its Freshman Writing program by developing classes especially for ESL students, and my role in the events as the department's ESL specialist. I will begin with an outline of South Alabama's Freshman Writing program and continue with a discussion of the problems faced in mainstream classes by teachers and ESL students. Next, the agenda of the workshop to train teachers in ESL composition pedagogy will be described. I will conclude with a brief description of the ESL classes that were introduced after the workshop. The purpose of this paper is to share my experience at South Alabama with ESL specialists who may be faced with a similar situation at other institutions.

The Freshman Writing Program at the University of South Alabama

The University of South Alabama, a 30-year old institution in the south-east, enrolls more than 12,000 students. About 900 are ESL students, who are international as well as immigrant. They originate from 78 countries and speak 37 languages.

Freshman Writing is sequenced as Composition I and Composition II, and about forty sections of both are offered every quarter. The focus of Composition I is expressive writing. At the end of the course, students write a short essay exam based on a reading, and the essays are graded holistically by the English Department faculty. If students pass, they take Composition II, where the focus is on academic writing.

Freshman Writing is taught mainly by tenured instructors who have Masters degrees in English Literature. Many have taught two composition courses per quarter for 15 years or more. Tenure-track and tenured faculty with Ph.D.s also teach composition on an irregular basis. Recently, about 20 adjunct faculty, some with masters and others with doctoral degrees, have been hired to teach composition. About 3,500 students enroll in Freshman Writing courses each academic year. About 200 are ESL students.

Problems Faced by ESL Students and Teachers in mainstream Classes

ESL students have complained for some time about Composition I, mainly because many of them fail the exam repeatedly. The main complaint was that the grading system was too strict, and that the students were expected to reach the proficiency level of native-speakers in order to pass the exam. Another complaint was that ESL students were isolated in mainstream classes, receiving little attention from the teachers. The students' complaints were echoed by the office of International Student Services, which was concerned about a possible drop in international student enrollment unless remedial measures were taken.

How did the teachers of mainstream classes at South Alabama react to the presence of ESL writers? Joseph (1992) conducted detailed interviews with ten teachers, many of whom had taught Freshman Writing for over 15 years. The teachers were asked a series of wide ranging open-ended questions. When asked what problems they encountered in teaching ESL students in mainstream classes, the teachers responded that ESL students were reluctant

to talk in class, didn't let the teachers know when they did not understood instructiors, had much lower proficiency levels than native-speaker students and therefore needed more explanations, which the native-speaker students found tedious. When asked if the majority of ESL students had the same writing problems as native-speakers, all the teachers responded in the negative; the main problems they saw in ESL students were in the use of idioms, prepositions, tenses, and in subject-verb agreement. Despite these problems, some teachers admitted that they spent the same amount of time helping ESL and native-speaker students, and five teachers stated that they made no special preparations to teach ESL students. Some teachers complained that they had difficulty in understanding the pronunciation and varieties of English spoken by the ESL students, which often resulted in miscommunication. The teachers said that ESL students expected the teachers to do most of the talking during conferences, and that some students found the one-to-one interaction with the teacher difficult to handle. According to some teachers, the difficulties during conferences only magnified the problems in the classroom. As for rhetorical differences, most of the teachers had no idea of how ESL students would organize a paper in their languages. One teacher commented that she "never dreamed they would organize a paper differently" (5).

Workshops in ESL Composition Pedagogy

As the recently hired ESL specialist in the English Department, I was asked to propose a solution to these problems. Obviously, mainstreaming of ESL writers was not effective. The second option, placing ESL students in basic/developmental classes, is perhaps the least appropriate option (see Silva, 1993; Leki, 1992). The solution was to offer Freshman Writing classes especially designed and designated for ESL students.

In a detailed proposal to the English Department Chair and the Dean of Arts and Sciences, I suggested the creation of special classes of Freshman Writing for ESL students, and outlined a curriculum and staffing strategies. Since budget restraints would not allow the hiring of ESL specialists, some

teachers had to be trained in ESL composition pedagogy. I volunteered to conduct a workshop in ESL composition pedagogy for teachers who were interested.

After the proposal was approved, another teacher and I taught pilot classes of Composition I and II for ESL students. Towards the end of the quarter, I invited teachers in the English Department to attend a three-day workshop. Fourteen teachers, including the director of Freshman Writing, participated in the first workshop. The participants were given a packet of reading materials a week in advance, and these readings were the basis for discussion during the workshop. The workshop agenda is given on the next page.

The workshops began with a presentation by the Coordinator of International Student Services, who provided statistics on the enrollment of international students and described their nationalities, languages, and academic majors. Next, a senior Instructor from the university's English Language Center described the TOEFL, entrance and exit tests, placement of ESL students, the center's curriculum, and textbooks.

The first reading, "Approaches to Second/Foreign Language Instruction" from Celce-Murcia was useful to the teachers, who needed an introduction to the methods of second language teaching, especially to the methods their students may have experienced before enrolling in Freshman Writing. The two readings from Littlewood which followed are suitable as introductory texts, since they are well illustrated and written in a simple, direct style. In "Errors and learning strategies", Littlewood discusses the evolving speech of the second language learner, not as a faulty version of the second language, but as the clearest evidence of the learners' developing system of the second language. In the next reading, "Using a second language," Littlewood describes communication strategies used to overcome gaps in the linguistic repertoire by second language speakers, such as adjusting the message (altering the meaning), using paraphrase, creating new words, and using non-linguistic resources are discussed.

Department of English - ESL Workshop
Agenda

Day 1	
Director, Office of International Services	Profile of International Students at South Alabama
Instructor, Department of ESL	TOEFL, Entrance & Exit Tests, Placement, ESL Curriculum, ESL Composition Courses, Textbooks
Topic	Readings
Approaches to Second/Foreign Language Teaching	"Language teaching approaches: An overview" - Celce-Murcia (1991)
Second Language Acquisition	"Errors and learning strategies" - Littlewood (1984)
	"Using a second language" - Littlewood (1984)
Culture Shock	*Cold Water* (video) Produced by Noriko Ogami
Day 2	
ESL Writers	*Understanding ESL Writers* - Leki (1992)
	"The classroom and the wider culture" - Shen (1989)
Writing & Response	"The peer review process" - Mittan (1989)
	"Learning to praise" - Daiker (1989)
	"Student input and negotiation of meaning . . ." - Goldstein & Conrad (1990)
	"Evaluating second language essays in regular composition classes" - Land and Whitley (1989)
Analysis of Student Papers	
Day 3	
Academic Writing	"ESL composition in higher education: Expectations of the academic audience" - Reid (1989)
Meeting with International Students	
Composition I and II	Syllabi, textbooks, and supplementary material

In the video *Cold Water*, twelve international students at Boston University are interviewed on culture shock and cross-cultural adaptations. Culture shock ranges from mild irritability to deep psychological panic and crisis. Teachers need to recognize the unusual behavior of their ESL students that may be a result of culture shock.

The second day of the workshop begins with a discussion based on Ilona Leki's *Understanding ESL Writers*, probably the most comprehensive text on the subject. The text contains chapters on the history of writing instruction in ESL, models of second language acquisition, the differences between ESL and basic writers, characteristics of ESL students, classroom expectations and behaviors, second language composing, contrastive rhetoric, sentence-level errors, and responding to ESL writing. Every chapter in *Understanding ESL Writers* was discussed during the workshops and the text continues to be used as a reference.

Leki saw ESL students from a teacher's viewpoint. The next reading, Fan Shen's "The classroom and the wider culture," is a poignant description of a student's experience in reconciling his Chinese identity with the rules of English composition. "Be yourself," the first rule of English composition, will not be useful to students from cultures where individualism is a synonym for selfishness. According to Fan Shen, the topic sentence and the rush to get to the point is merely symbolic of the values of busy people in an industrialized society.

Robert Mittan's "The peer review process" first discusses the numerous benefits of peer reviews such as providing student writers with reactions, questions, and responses from authentic readers; enabling student writers to receive more feedback from multiple and mutually reinforcing perspectives; enabling them to gain a clearer understanding of the readers' needs by reciprocating the role of audience for their peers; making students less apprehensive about their own writing abilities by seeing the difficulties of their peers, and lessening the teacher's reading load. The article contains numerous suggestions for the use of peer reviews with ESL writers.

"Learning to praise" by Donald Daiker is a refreshing article

because it reminds composition teachers of the importance of positive comments on student papers. A study at Texas A & M showed that, out of a total of 864 comments written on 40 freshman essays, 94 percent focused on what the what the students had done poorly. A major cause of writing apprehension is past failure, and students need all the positive comments teachers can provide.

Teachers have to conference more often with ESL writers than with native-speaker students. Not much has been written on this topic, but "Student input and negotiation of meaning" by Goldstein and Conrad is an excellent reference. The authors stress the need to set the agenda and clarify goals prior to conferencing with ESL student writers.

The final reading was "Evaluating Second Language Essays in Regular Composition Classes," in which Land and Whitley suggest that teachers of mainstream composition classes need to recognize the varying rhetorical patterns in the essays of ESL writers and not consider such essays as disorganized. The authors suggest that the assimilation of new rhetorics would enrich mainstream academic discourse.

Following the reading, two papers written by ESL students were analyzed. The analysis, and the discussion that followed, showed the teachers how to look beyond surface-level errors and focus on content and meaning in their students' papers..

The only reading for the third day, Joy Reid's "ESL Composition in Higher Education", explores the breakdown of communication that occurs because ESL students do not have the necessary cultural background, information, and experience to successfully complete academic writing tasks. The reading, which includes assignments given by faculty from a few subject areas, offers suggestions for using contrastive rhetoric, authentic writing tasks, and rhetorical and syntactic conventions. Since the purpose of the Composition II course at South Alabama is "to emphasize the types of writing that students will do during their college career," this was an especially useful reading for the workshop participants.

The next item on the agenda was a meeting with four

international students, which lasted more than an hour. The students, who were from Malaysia, Pakistan, Japan, and Honduras (representing the largest groups of ESL students at South Alabama), narrated with unusual candor their experience as writers in their first language, the methods used to teach English in their countries, and their experiences in ESL courses in the U.S. For some of teachers, this was the first extended discussion with ESL students. A few teachers later told me that this was the high-point of the workshop.

The workshop concluded with a comparison of the syllabi used in the pilot sections of Composition I and II with the syllabi for regular freshman writing classes. Examination copies of textbooks were also analyzed for their appropriacy for the new classes.

Freshman Writing Classes for ESL Students

Ten teachers who participated in the workshop volunteered to teach classes for ESL students. Accordingly, three sections of Composition I and three sections of Composition II for ESL students have been taught since the the Winter of 1992. Following my suggestion, the enrollment is limited to 20 students. (The enrollment in regular Freshman Writing classes is 25.) The new classes were publicized through the international students' newsletter and listed in the course schedule as being reserved for students whose native language is not English. ESL students were under no compulsion to enroll in these classes. In fact, a few continue to enroll in mainstream classes.

At the end of the Winter 1992 quarter, 90 percent of the students enrolled in ESL classes passed the essay examination at the end of Composition I. This was a remarkable achievement for two reasons. First, the previous passing rate for ESL students in mainstream classes was about 60 percent. Second, the passing rate for native speaker students in the same examination was only 75 percent. One reason for the sharp rise in the passing rate may be the English faculty's sensitivity to ESL student writing as a result of the workshop, since all the attendees

also graded the papers. Although the passing level for students in ESL classes is now lower, it is still an improvement over the previous passing rate for ESL students in mainstream classes.

The second ESL workshop has now been held, attended by some teachers who had attended the first workshop as well as others who had shown an interest in teaching ESL classes. Monthly meetings, where teachers share information on students and exchange ideas, have been a feature from the start. Representatives of English Departments of two area universities also attended the second workshop, and these departments are planning to introduce ESL classes in their Freshman Writing program.

Most teachers who taught ESL classes comented that the students, who usually remain passive and silent in mixed classes, became actively involved in classroom activities and discussions, and often asked questions from the teacher. Some teachers told me that they looked forward to meeting their international students each day, and that the students had rekindled their interest in teaching composition. (Some of these teachers had taught 6 sections of freshman writing each academic year for 15 years or more.) One teacher said that she learned as much from the ESL students as they did from her. She wished that she could return for a Ph.D. in ESL pedagogy.

The response from ESL students has been equally enthusiastic. In a recent survey of 180 students who were or had earlier been enrolled in ESL Freshman Writing classes, 92 percent agreed that the classes should be continued. When asked to explain their support for these classes, many students said that they felt at ease in these classes, mainly because they did not have to be embarrassed when speaking with an accent. Others stated that the teachers were caring and understanding of their problems, and paid more attention to them.

We prepare ESL students to enter the American academic system by sheltering them in intensive English programs, and hope that this preparation will help them to achieve their academic objectives. But, for many ESL students, the required courses in Freshman Writing is a formidable obstacle to their academic

success. This is best seen in the large number of students who excel in their academic subjects, yet choose to postpone Freshman Writing to their junior or senior year.

As Silva (1993) notes, in mainstream classes, ESL students differences could be considered and treated as intellectual deficiencies by teachers, resulting in "resentment, alienation, loss of self confidence, poor grades, and, ultimately, academic failure" (5) for the students. As ESL specialists, we must enlighten our English department colleagues on the needs of these students. If we cannot induce English departments to introduce ESL classes, we could at least volunteer to conduct workshops for English teachers, so that they can be better sensitized to the needs of ESL students. The cry for help often rises from our ESL students as well as from teachers of mainstream classes. We owe it to our students to respond.

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